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Tanya Pollard. Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England

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Tanya Pollard. *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England*.

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The no-nonsense title of Tanya Pollard's *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England* led me at first glance to imagine a dry tome cataloguing and exploring the medicine chest of the Renaissance English stage. This book is no such thing: not only is it meticulously researched and a compelling read, but beneath its surface its argument stretches well beyond the limited promise of its title. Pollard delves deep into the period's antitheatrical debates, making sense of their angst by parsing theater's more-than-metaphorical link to poisons and narcotics, and the possibility of its affective, transformative power over its audiences.

Pollard lays the groundwork for her suggested synergy between drugs and theater with a brief reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* — to which she returns once more in her epilogue — and to Oberon's infamous, problematic love potion. The potion is the model of Pollard's pharmacopoeia: it affects the lovers both well and ill, is both poison and remedy, messes with their minds, and, insofar as we are all Puck's dreamers, messes with ours as well. Its layered ambivalence will inform Pollard's argument throughout, for it is the book's principal contention that early modern pharmacy, like early modern theater, operates on the threshold between remedy and harm. Theater, Pollard argues, is — and was understood by the early moderns as — a kind of drug for audiences and players alike: this is what makes it feared, pleasurable, and dangerous.

Pollard's focus on the effects of spectatorship through the lens of pharmacy gives her arguments an original angle on familiar material. She is careful to note that both sides of the antitheatrical debates coded "plays as drugs" (9), and that a deep uncertainty over the potentially poisonous yet potentially curative power of theater informs playwrights and their defenders as much as their detractors. Her first two chapters capture this ambivalence smartly. Jonson, she argues in discussing both *Sejanus* and *Volpone*, uses questionable drugs to frame his "indictments of theatrical dissimulation" (53), not to condemn theater but to imagine it as "a beneficial, though often bitter, medicine" (54). Reading Shakespeare in chapter 2, Pollard builds careful links between curatives, poisons, and meta-performances first in *Romeo and Juliet* and later in *Antony and Cleopatra*. She concludes that, while "dramatic spectacles . . . prove devastating, even fatal, to their onstage audiences" (79), they also provide potent imaginative consolations for audiences both onstage and off.

Pollard's final three chapters shift away from these stimulating but fairly basic

close readings and into exciting new territory. Her earlier readings of figures such as Webster's Vittoria and Shakespeare's Juliet and Cleopatra hint at a connection between anxieties over gender and anxieties over pharmacy that becomes explicit in chapters 3 and 4, which handle debates about cosmetics and the related theatrical convention of the poisoned kiss, respectively. This is welcome work indeed, useful backstory for such dramatic commonplaces as the polluted and polluting woman, or for set-pieces railing about face-painting. Especially valuable here is Pollard's reading of *The Revenger's Tragedy* in the context of two other plays employing similar poison-kiss devices, *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* and *The Duke of Milan*. This cross-reading not only offers helpful context for Vindice's ploy with Gloriana's skull, but also allows Pollard to advance her argument about the narcotic power of spectacle through a gendered lens. In these plays, she argues, women are transformed literally into spectacle via the pharmacopoeia of the dressing table, and it is men as idolatrous spectators who suffer the consequences of an addiction to their dangerous theater.

Pollard concludes with *Hamlet* — not surprising, given her focus on poison, remedy, and performance. But this chapter, like her others, offers a new take on an old tale: she focuses on the materiality of the ear and the tangibly poisonous functioning of language in the play — both framed, as usual, by a helpful medical context. This chapter, in fact, exemplifies what is strongest in Pollard's work: she rethinks some of our most basic assumptions about early modern English theater by using the oft-noticed but rarely theorized lens of pharmacy. The result is a book that will be valuable reading both for historians and theater scholars of the period, as well as for performance theorists interested in learning more about the material contexts of early metatheater.

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